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Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos

SIMON CREAK

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, xvi+337p.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on an under-studied country, Laos, on an also under-studied topic, sport in relation to nationalism and masculinity.

Before looking at the evolution of sport and masculinity from a chronological perspective, Simon Creak reviews in the Introduction numerous theories and concepts related to physicality and masculinity—from Ana Maria Alonso's idea that physical practice strengthens national consciousness to Clifford Geertz's view of power in a theatre state exercised through spectacle, for instance—as a means to present his overall argument that sport is the most significant “means of substantializing notions of the body, masculinity, and the nation in modern societies” (p. 12), since at the center of the book is empire building, nation making, and socialist construction.

The first chapter discusses the case study of the indigenous game *tikki*, which resembles field hockey, and how French travelers' accounts transformed the game into a crucial element of what it meant to be “truly” Lao. Such accounts served the French colonial state's aim to differentiate the Lao territories and people from Siam and the Siamese. Indeed, the traveler-writers, young Lao researchers, and École française d'Extrême-Orient scholars Paul Lévy and Charles Archiambault, by writing about *tikki* as a tradition and ritual, helped in creating “an idea of Laos, justifying its constitution as a French colony and later as a distinct and independent nation” (p. 50).

Advancing through the French colonial period, chapter 2 presents the Vichy-era Lao Nhay cultural renovation movement (1941–45). While reading this chapter I discovered that it was built as a critique of my own work on the Lao Nhay movement and sports in Laos during the Vichy era (Raffin, 2005). The author contests my argument that sport development was secondary to the promotion of the Lao Nhay movement, whose function was to nurture a cultural and linguistic nationalism in response to the threat of Thai irredentism in Laos. Creak contends that both were important and “complemented one another” (p. 53). Although rightfully underlining that I did not look at Lao-language sources, his own argument is based mostly on French sources. Adding a few examples from Lao-language sources on sport, a Lao-language novel by P.S. Nginn (who was a Lao Nhay member), a short excerpt of the memoir of Governor Jean Decoux stating that “I decided to rely on Sports-Youth activities in this country to launch ‘*le mouvement lao*’” (p. 66), and mentioning the creation of sport clubs without talking about their activities, membership, etc. does not provide enough evidence to convince me that the colonial state's politics at the time promoted both sport and the Lao Nhay movement on an equal footing and that subsequently the Lao Nhay movement was “as much a physical awakening as it was a mental or cultural one in Laos, too” (p. 64).

Overall, through this chapter the author stresses how the male body was the primary agent of Philippe Pétain's National Revolution in the metropole and in Indochina, and how racial and

right-wing ideologies as well as militarism shaped sport policies in Indochina. Such a militarization of society was carried out in the 1950s, with the National Youth and Physical Education Cadre School, or ENCJEP, being molded after the Vichy-era schools in Phan Thiet and Vientiane (p. 95).

This leads to chapter 3, which discusses the militarization of masculinity in independent Laos during the 1950s. Projects are usually not carried out in a vacuum; hence, the sport policies of the 1950s show quite a few continuities with the World War II period, from the military-style choreography of human bodies to adapted Vichy-era uniforms for ENCJEP instructors and trainees and the use of the “natural method” for trainee parachutists. At the same time, the rapid militarization of Lao society not only offered many new career opportunities for males but also produced new ideas of what it meant to be a Lao man. The masculine ideal of the body was defined around “its size, strength, and solidarity with others” and in opposition to the female body as the “preserver of customs and culture” (p. 87). Moreover, the militarized male body was depicted as a positive symbol of modernity.

Chapter 4 provides a snapshot of the 1960s National Games, which ended in 1964 with Major General Phoumi Nosavan’s loss of power. The National Games in Laos are analyzed using the concept of theatrics of power as a means to show how the Games were a tool for Phoumi Nosavan to display his power. Despite political divisions, national unity was the principal theme of the Games, which were intended “to assemble the nation in the National Stadium, a metaphor of national desire, the nation-in-miniature, and to project an image of Phoumi as national statesman *par excellence*” (p. 126).

Within the context of the Cold War, not only internal but also regional divisions impacted the sporting scene in Laos. Chapter 5 argues that the sporting relations established by the Communist and non-Communist cliques underlined how regional dynamics influenced the globalized sporting culture in Laos. Laos’s participation in the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games from 1959 to 1975 was shaped by regional politics, as both geographical and ideological criteria were conditions of membership. What constituted the authentic Lao nation was at stake as the Royal Lao Government viewed Communism and Northern Vietnam as a threat to Laos and its culture and subsequently supported the SEAP Games’ principles of non-Communist solidarity. In contrast, the Communist Neo Lao Hak Sat, also claiming to represent the authentic Laos, participated in a competing regional sporting club, the GANEFO (Game of the New Emerging Forces), which professed a position of non-alignment and was welcomed by many Communist-bloc countries.

Another important historical turning point was the creation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in December 1975. Chapters 6 and 7 present the heavy involvement of Communist countries when it came to physical education in Laos under the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. With Laos being a typical socialist country, the state’s rhetoric was focused on building a “new socialist person” through, among other measures, building a mass sport and physical culture. Looking also at the performative dimension of mass mobilization, Creak stresses how enjoyment

was the key component of spectator sports for propping socialism. The press and various reports from the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Religious Affairs were full of language emphasizing a “lively,” “enjoyable,” “fun” atmosphere as a means to build a positive attitude toward the revolution and the Party in the context of poverty and hardship. Sport was not only a means to increase domestic legitimacy and international prestige but also a way to boost socialist friendships, such as by Laos participating for the first time in the Olympic Games held in Moscow in 1980.

The book ends with the Vientiane Games in 2009—the 25th Southeast Asian Games—and the glory and outburst of national pride they fostered. Still, success on the field did not change reality, since in the end one of the big winners was the authoritarian regime of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, which tolerated no dissent. In parallel, the author brings up the issue of Laos’s financial dependence on China for help with hosting the event, what he calls “Lao-style development” (p. 235)—depending on foreign donors and investment—and how sports provided an avenue for Laos to express its love-hate relationship with Thailand and its complex relationship with Vietnam.

While Creak’s work is commendable for offering more than a historical account of the development of sport in Laos by using various theoretical frameworks in order to grasp this evolution, some of the theoretical analyses could be more fully developed through the use of examples. For instance, underlining Jan Gross’ point regarding propaganda under socialist regimes where the distinction between “naming and judging” is erased (p.171), a precise example within the Laotian context to support this point would have benefited his analysis.

Notwithstanding the above, Creak has collected many sources, which allows him to present a rich account of various issues in relation to sport in Laos. Thus, this is an important book for people interested in ideologies and state building in Laos over time from the vantage point of sport and physical education.

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